

Panhandle Health District

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www.phd1.idaho.gov

Free Mammogram Reveals Unsuspecting Woman's Cancer

By Cynthia Taggart
Panhandle Health District

Lisa Bridge had no obvious reason to worry about breast cancer. Her family had no history of the disease. She periodically checked her breasts in the shower for lumps. Breast cancer wasn't even on her radar screen when her co-workers at Wal-Mart pointed her to the Panhandle Health District (PHD) in June.

"We were talking about women's check-ups at lunchtime and I realized I hadn't had a Pap smear in 18 years," said Lisa, the mother of two adult daughters. "I wanted to know where I could get one that didn't cost much and they told me the Panhandle Health District.

"I can't believe six weeks later I'm going in for a mastectomy."

Lisa's trip to the health district started a chain of events that resulted in a diagnosis of breast cancer and the decision to remove her breast.

"I never would have found it on my own, no matter how many self-tests I did," she said. "They needed pictures and a biopsy."

Lisa's Pap smear indicated no problems, but a PHD nurse called her anyway to tell her she qualified for a free mammogram.

Since 2001, PHD has received about \$70,000 every year from the Susan G. Komen Affiliate in Coeur d'Alene. That money provides breast exams, mammograms and ultrasounds for women younger than age 50 in the five northern counties with limited incomes and no medical insurance or only catastrophic health insurance,

When breast exams reveal possible problems and further medical care is needed, PHD channels women who qualify into the federally-funded Women's Health Check program.

That program offers clinical breast exams, mammograms and Pap smears to women ages 50 to 64 with limited income and no health insurance or insurance that doesn't include mammograms or Pap smears. It also extends breast screening services to eligible women ages 30-49 after exams indicate and a health care professional confirms a suspicion of cancer.

Lisa falls in the younger group eligible for help and had never had a mammogram.

"I think a girl had told me it cost her \$300 to have one. I wouldn't have set that much money aside to do it," Lisa said. "So I couldn't pass this up. I made the appointment the next week."

Three weeks after the mammogram, Lisa received a call asking her to return to the imaging center.

"I was scared. I ignored it for a week," she said. "I figured they'd call back if it was important."

The imaging center did call back. Lisa needed a more thorough mammogram and some questionable tissue removed and studied. The questionable tissue was spread throughout her breast. A second biopsy revealed a small spot doctors diagnosed as cancer.

Doctors recommended a full mastectomy, certain that Lisa would need more surgeries if they removed only the cancerous spot.

Lisa's daughters and mother-in-law rallied around her. Her doctor gave her books that explain the process and reconstructive surgery. Her mastectomy is scheduled 10 days before the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure in Coeur d'Alene, and Lisa is ready.

"It's surreal," she said. "It's a creepy feeling to know I have cancer in my body."

Seven women in the five northern counties were diagnosed with breast or cervical cancer through the Komen Grant/Women's Health Check so far this year and 10 were diagnosed through the program in 2006. Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure funds have provided breast screenings for about 1,500 people in the five northern counties since 2003.

"The women who get these screenings are our hotel housekeepers, waitresses, child-care providers and our neighbors. They're hard-working, sometimes widows," said Gail Turley, a senior registered nurse at the Panhandle Health District headquarters in Hayden.

Lisa's health insurance through work started shortly after her visit to PHD. To keep her premiums affordable, she agreed to a \$1,000 deductible. Insurance will help with her medical bills, but she still faces a heavy financial burden. She can't work for two weeks and has no more sick time available. With insurance, she's not eligible for state aid.

So, Lisa plans to return to stocking Wal-Mart's shelves the moment her doctor clears her to work.

"In the grocery business, I notice everything with a pink ribbon now. I'm so aware," Lisa said. "Everyone involved has just been wonderful. I tell everyone I talk to to go to the Panhandle Health District and get their tests. I wouldn't have known without them."

Panhandle Health District offices are located at:

Kootenai County—8500 N. Atlas Rd., Hayden, 415-5100

Shoshone County—114 W. Riverside, Kellogg, 786-7474

Benewah County—711 Jefferson, St. Maries, 245-4556

Bonner County—1020 Michigan, Sandpoint, 263-5159

Boundary County—7403 Caribou, Bonners Ferry, 267-5558

Women's Health Check Eligibility Guidelines

The Komen grant funds breast cancer screening for men and women of any age.

The income guidelines are the same as for Women's Health Check.

Women's Health Check is a breast and cervical cancer-screening program. Eligible women have no health insurance coverage for Pap tests or mammograms and meet the following income guidelines:

- \$20,420 annual income for a single woman
- \$27,380 annual income for a two-person family
- \$34,340 annual income for a three-person family
- \$41,300 annual income for a four-person family